

恋はドーナツの穴のように

Love is Like a Donut Hole

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## Chapter 1

That day, Kurabayashi Yoshikazu<sup>1</sup> was tired.

He was horribly tired.

He was working as the manager of *Ring Ring Donuts*, the chain doughnut store found throughout the country. Despite his managerial position though, the responsibility he was tasked with was nothing so serious as having the lives of others in his hands or having the economy of Japan rest on his shoulders. He was a mere manager that was hired to look after a little shop in the boonies. His presence was barely noticeable even within his own storefront.

Even so, a donut shop can get quite busy. The workday starts at 6 AM with restocking. After multiple part-timers quit one after another, the place was short-handed. Of course, that also meant they were in the red, requiring him to work overtime. And to top it all off, he had interviews with potential part-time hires every minute of spare time he had that day.

He did his best to avoid thinking about just how many interviews he had gone through already. Each and every one only added to his exhaustion. Like that young girl flaunting her fancy long nails and dyed curls. Or that housewife full of requests like, “I can’t come in on weekends because those are my husband’s days off,” and “I have to go pick up my kids from school on weekdays so I’ll have to leave early.” Or that kid going about how he wants to be in a band. “When I’m famous, I’ll tell all my fans I used to work here,” he said. What nonsense.

All Kurabayashi wanted was someone he could hire *now*, not some empty promise of exposure in the far-off future.

And now, sitting in front of him across the table in the corner of the shop was a high school boy in his school uniform.

“Will you be able to come in to work starting tomorrow?”

“Huh.”

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<sup>1</sup> 倉林= Kurabayashi; 由和= Yoshikazu

“Can you work weekends?”

“Yeah.”

“I might have to ask you to come in early mornings regardless of the day of the week when you’re on summer break. Will that be alright with you?”

“Huh.”

He wished his applicant would give a clearer answer than just “Huh” and “Yeah.”

The summer sky was already beginning to turn red. With the last applicant sitting before him, there was no end to Kurabayashi’s exasperated sighs.

*Uehara Rio*<sup>2</sup>.

The student’s large build was mismatched with the small, careful handwriting of the name written on his résumé.

*Rio*.

It was an oddly cute name for a guy. Kurabayashi thought it must be one of those weird modern names. He looked at it with irritation as he thought of how kids these days knew how to write characters like “rose”<sup>3</sup> and “lemon”<sup>4</sup> like it was nothing, what with all those trendy parents using unconventional kanji to name them.

Kurabayashi himself was twenty-nine. His looks were on the nicer side, but nothing about him particularly stood out. He was just an average man quickly approaching his thirties.

He had no intention of asking much from this high school student, just short of a generation younger than himself. All Kurabayashi wanted was for him to smile as he took orders from customers, put the donuts in a bag if there were four or fewer, and in a box if there were more.

He wondered to himself why not a single person he interviewed all day could grant him his one small wish.

“Uehara-kun, you have quite the unusual name.”

“Huh”

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<sup>2</sup> 上原= Uehara; 凜生= Rio

<sup>3</sup> 薔薇= rose

<sup>4</sup> 檸檬= lemon

—*Goddammit. Even though he doesn't look all that bad...*

Firstly, the student was tall. He was at least ten centimeters taller than the 170 centimeter-tall Kurabayashi, and his well-proportioned build only made him look taller. A pair of flower-like eyes peered out from under his silky brown hair.

The kid was fairly handsome, but showed not a single smile, so the impression he gave Kurabayashi was far from what could be called “cheerful.” His thin lips were tightly closed. All his eyes did were stare straight at Kurabayashi.

Despite the emptiness of his gaze, being stared at made Kurabayashi uncomfortable, and he quickly averted his attention back to the résumé in his hands.

Kurabayashi doubted whether the kid actually wanted the job. Under the heading *Strengths* was the word “reticence,” and under *Hobbies* was “Whittling pencils.”

“Uh, this ‘Whittling pencils’ you have under the ‘Hobbies’ section... Do you want to tell me more about that?”

“Well... I just whittle them. That’s all there is to it.”

*Well. Thank you so very much for the straightforward answer. It certainly can't be any clearer than that.*

“Haha, with your build, you must be pretty suited for sports. Don’t you have any school clubs that you’re in?”

“Huh.”

“If you could, I’d like it if you answered with ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’”

“Hu-... Oh, ‘Yes.’”

*He corrected himself.*

But that was all he said. This high school kid whose strength was “reticence” had not even a flicker of the friendliness Kurabayashi was hoping for. As for “whittling pencils”—Kurabayashi certainly was not about to ask him to showcase his talents for the interview.

Kurabayashi gave him his pleasant smile of model hospitality, and pushed his chair back as he stood up.

“Alright then. I’ll let you know the results of your application in a few days.”

“Hu-... Oh, ‘Yes.’”

There was no need to drag the interview on any longer. Kurabayashi was obviously not about to hire him.

*Yeah, no. Rejected,* Kurabayashi thought as he headed toward the exit. As he glanced at the kitchen on the other side of the counter, his eyes met with the young employee panicking in front of the donut frying machines. He silently begged Kurabayashi for help.

It was undeniable that they were short-handed. Way too short-handed. The donut display case was conspicuously empty. Should one of those fussy customers come here, complaints of ‘Not enough variety,’ would surely go to the company offices. And then that criticism would come back to bite Kurabayashi.

*—Why should I care. Stop relying on me. Don’t be so dependent.*

Despite what Kurabayashi thought to himself, he had his duty as manager.

But he was really just the manager in name only. In practice, his position consisted of chores and odd-jobs. Kurabayashi had to quit his company job in Tokyo three years earlier when his father fell ill. He returned to his countryside hometown, and was struggling to find new employment when he responded to the *Help Wanted* ad for the donut shop—a field of work he had absolutely no experience in.

He understood now why they were so quick to hire him. On top of the demanding, labor-intensive work, the manager was tasked with overseeing all those selfish part-time workers. With senior staff members resigning at the rate that they did, it was no mystery how Kurabayashi pushed up into the position in under three years.

*It wasn’t like I wanted to be the manager.*

On days like this, his mind was full of these miserable thoughts.

*Ugh, everything’s such a bother.*

“Ack.”

Distracted, Kurabayashi nearly walked right into the boy who had stopped in his tracks in front of him.

The high school student that Kurabayashi wanted out of his shop already was—for some reason or another—peering intently into the donut case. Those eyes that were so indifferent just a moment before were now staring into the case without even blinking.

“Hm? You like donuts?”

“Well, yeah...”

With his faltering voice, he continued with words indicating the first sign of interest Kurabayashi ever heard from him:

“’cause donuts are tasty.”

Something must have gotten into Kurabayashi.

“Do you want to work here then?” he asked offhandedly.

Indeed, he was incredibly tired that day.

## Chapter 2

The skies outside the window of the high school classroom were blue.

The scorchingly bright sun was blinding in the summer sky. The deep blue behind the gathering clouds looked ready to suck the whole world into it at any moment.

But the view somehow looked fake, like a cheap movie.

Which was understandable, given the air-conditioning that kept everyone in the classroom dry.

The visibly hot outside scenery clashed with the refreshing coolness felt on his skin. Rio, passing the break at his desk near the window of the noisy classroom, stared absent-mindedly with his usual, silent demeanor.

“Hey Rio!”

He turned around to face the owner of the voice.

“...Hakkun.”

“Stop calling me that.”

Rio’s childhood friend and classmate, Yagisawa Hakuto<sup>1</sup>, headed toward his desk.

The boy, disliking everything that called attention to his short stature and charmingly cute face, scrunched his face at the mention of his nickname.

“What the hell, you look kinda dejected today. Got a stomachache? Migraine? Pondering the dullness of life are ya?”

“Hakuto, this is all your fault.”

Not really having a preference, Rio obliged his friend and called him by his given name. With that, Yagisawa’s wide eyes grew even wider.

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<sup>1</sup> 八木沢 = Yagisawa; 珀虎 = Hakuto (虎 = “tiger”)

*He's not much of a 'tiger.'* More like a small rodent, Rio thought to himself.

“What, what’s my fault?”

“I got that job you wrote my résumé for.”

To Rio’s dim response, Yagisawa looked at him with disbelief.

“You kidding me? What kind of store hires someone with *that* résumé? We’re talking about that ‘Ring-Ring’ place right?”

“Yeah.”

Neither of them had even imagined Rio would get the job.

Yagisawa was the one who filled out the résumé. Upon hearing Rio mutter, “I’m not really up for this interview thing,” he immediately offered to help. “Let me at it. I’ll write you a résumé that’ll fail you in one shot,” he said.

It all started several months ago.

“Maybe I should get a part-time job.”

Those were the words Rio let slip at home one day.

Rather than wanting to actually get a job, he was just looking for an escape from his meddlesome mother.

His father worked away from home, and his elder brother moved to Tokyo to get a job two years ago, leaving Rio alone with his mother who had nothing better to do than to poke her nose in his business. Contrary to his expectations that she would be against his desire for a job, she promptly gathered up information from around town of places that were looking to hire help.

Perhaps it was important to her that Rio worked at a place she chose for him. He was wary of being overly hasty with taking her up on her offers though, as he was sure she would continue to meddle if he did.

*I’ll just avoid getting a job altogether*, Rio had thought. If he failed to get himself hired, surely his mother would lose interest as well. So Rio let Yagisawa carry on with his plan.

Rio had nothing against his mother.

He was just unsure of how to really get along with her.



“Well that’s weird. Why the heck would anyone hire you? I mean, even without that BS résumé, nobody in their right mind would.”

“How should I know.”

People often said that Rio was too curt.

He was not quiet on purpose. He just disliked saying anything more than necessary. There was no need for frivolous laughter or anything like that. As a child, people used to commend him for being “obedient” when his quietness suited their needs, and criticize him for being “uncute” when it did not.

“Hey, you think that place might be doing some shady stuff or something? Who was it that did your interview? The manager? What was he like?”

“What he was like...”

Rio stared at the sky.

Memories are rather vague for most people. When they remember things, colors and shapes are usually indistinct.

However, Rio was a little different. He could recall the things he saw as though they were photographs.

“The manager... was kind of thin and light and faint...”

“What is he, a ghost?”

“Ohh, pink.”

“What?”

Rio could see multiple pink rings in his mind. White frosting. Yellow custard spilling out. Fluffy, light brown rings decorated with so many colors.

There were nameplates sitting in front of the different colors.

Rio began to read off the words he saw, one by one.

“Strawberry Ring, Chocolate Ring, Cinnamon Cruller, Honey Honey, New Fashion, Devil Chocolat...”

“Wha-... Rio, Rio stop! I wasn’t asking about the donuts.”

“Oh... Sorry. I was hungry yesterday.”

The image captured in his mind was the donut case he had looked at on his way out of the shop.

“So, what about the manager?”

“...Don’t remember.”

“Honestly, that’s an awesome waste of good talent right there.”

“Oh, maybe... I should have written this down as my strength instead?”

“You idiot. Remember how that got you embarrassed in public before? ‘s not like you can remember *everything* with that.”

Rio’s “talent” was rather inconsistent. Back in kindergarten, when he recited the names of hundreds upon hundreds of superhero movie characters, complete with their respective villains and monsters, all of the adults around him lauded him as a “prodigy” and talked excitedly about his future prospects. But by the time he reached elementary school, his “talent” was revealed for what it truly was.

When he was featured on a TV show by someone else’s recommendation, he was left completely unable to showcase his talents with the tasks he was given for the event.

“You’re the one who got me there in the first place.”

That someone who sent in Rio’s information to the TV studio was none other than the elementary school aged Hakkun.

“Ahh, did I now? Well anyway, you didn’t want to get the job so ‘reticent’ should have been just fine. Not that it mattered since you got it anyway. But whatever, I didn’t write anything that wasn’t true. That should mean you’ll have no problems working at ‘Ring-Ring,’ amiright? Congrats on getting hired!”

He was just as irresponsible as he was back when he was carrying that oversized elementary school backpack.

Though he thought of arguing, Rio knew he could never win with words against this talkative childhood friend of his. All he said after opening his mouth a few times to speak was, “Yeah.”

There was no helping it now that it was official.

Rio was also known for taking things with good grace.

“By the way Rio... What happened during lunch? I was gonna come eat with you but I heard someone called you out?”

“Eh?”

“Girl from the another class.”

“Oh...”

“What, you got confessed to again?”

Rio nodded, not having any reason to lie.

Yagisawa’s response suggested an odd mixture of mild surprise and knowingness.

“Hmm... really? And? You gonna go out?”

“Well, yeah.”

Rio was single at the moment and had no need to reject her. He had never spoken to the girl before, but he recognized her and she was cute.

He had no idea what her personality was like.

“Huh... You really don’t turn down anyone who comes your way, do you? How long’re you gonna last this time? You should honestly just...”

“What about you, Hakuto?”

“Eh...”

“Didn’t you say there was some girl you liked?”

He had heard back in spring that his childhood friend had a crush on someone. Not anyone Rio was acquainted with, he was told. All he knew was that Hakuto had been on the School Festival Committee with this girl from another class during their first year.

“Oh, that... I already got rejected thanks.”

Rio had no words with which to respond to the blunt answer.

He was unaware that his friend had even asked her out.

“So that’s that. I’ll be spending my summer break studying quietly at home like a good student. I’ll get better grades than you and get into a better college and get a better job and get married

and have my victory in life someday. So you just go on ahead and get yourself lost in work and be head over heels with that girl of yours.”

Unsure of whether what “Hakkun” said was supposed to be some morbid joke or if he was actually serious, Rio found himself unable to really smile.